Grammar H: Modality

■ Modality

A Japanese sentence consists of two parts, each of which has different semantic characteristics.

(1) *Kitto kare wa isogashii n darō ne* "No doubt, he is busy, don't you think?

In (1), what constitutes the core of the meaning ("he being busy") is expressed inside the sentence. In contrast, the elements that appear outside the sentence, such as *kitto* at the beginning of the sentence and *darō* and *ne* at the end of the sentence, do not add anything to the content of the sentence. They express the subjective attitude of the speaker, such as her/his perception and way of communication.

The part of a sentence that expresses the content of the matter is called proposition, and the part that expresses the speaker's attitude is called modality. In a Japanese sentence the proposition appears inside the sentence, and modality wraps it around, as shown in (2).

(2)

| proposition | modality |
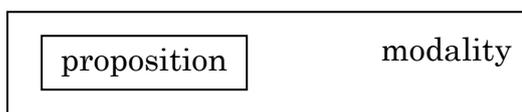
The proposition carries the objective meaning content of the sentence. The predicate is placed at the center of the objective meaning, and various components are added to it to express a more complex situation. Components at the proposition level include voice, which concerns the expression of movements, aspect, which expresses movement process, and tense, which expresses the temporal placement of events.

Typically, modality is defined as that which expresses the psychological attitude of the speaker at the time of utterance. Sub-classes of modality include modality of evaluation, such as evaluation of the situation (e.g., *chikoku shitemoii 'it's OK to be late'*), modality of recognition, such as expressing true/false judgment (e.g., *tsukarete iru yōda* 'he looks tired'), modality of explanation, which expresses the relationship to another sentence (e.g., *Kasa o wasuremashita. Isoide ita n desu.* 'I forgot my umbrella. I was in a hurry.'), and modality of communication which expresses the way the speaker relates information to the listener (e.g., *Kanojo nara asoko ni iru yo* 'She's over there, you see?'). Sentential types (expression patterns), such as declarative, interrogative, imperative, and elements related to the attitudes of utterance, such as politeness, are sometimes considered modality.

Sometimes a modal form may lack part of its semantic requirement. For example, *darō* and *kamoshirenai* both express the speaker's cognitive judgment. However, *darō* is a pure form of modality that expresses judgment at the time of speech, while *kamoshirenai* can specify the tense, as in *Kare wa korarenai kamoshirenakatta* 'He might not have been able to come,' and thus, does not meet the requirement of "at the time of the utterance." This is a reflection of the fact that modality, which originally is a semantic concept, is highly grammaticized in Japanese.

→モダリティの副詞 Modal adverbs (2-H), モダリティと文体 Modality and Style (2-M)

- References

Nitta, Yoshio (1991)　*Nihongo no Modaritii to Ninshō* "Japanese Modality and Person."　Hituzi Syobo.

Masuoka, Takashi (1991) *Modaritii no Bunpō* "Grammar of Modality." Kurosio Publishers.

<div align="right">(Adachi Taro)</div>